

# District Leadership in Professional Development:

## Exemplary Cases



**Partnership for Kentucky Schools**

Jane L. David,  
*Bay Area Research Group*

G. Williamson McDiarmid,  
*University of Alaska*

Thomas B. Corcoran,  
*Consortium for Policy Research in Education*

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Jane L. David,  
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**Partnership for Kentucky Schools**

600 Cooper Drive  
Lexington, Kentucky 40502  
tel 859.455.9595  
fax 859.455.9797  
email [admin@pfks.org](mailto:admin@pfks.org)  
web [www.pfks.org](http://www.pfks.org)

## BACKGROUND

KERA has dramatically changed the professional development landscape in Kentucky. Site-based decision making, delegation of professional development funds to the school site, and the test-based accountability system all contribute to a different way of making decisions about the kinds of professional development teachers have. This new way of doing business has benefits but, like many elements of KERA, it also poses challenges for district leadership. On the one hand, schools have discretion over 65 percent of the funds for professional development so that choices are matched to each school's unique needs. On the other hand, districts, with 35 percent of the funds, are in a position to identify both individual school and district-wide needs that may not be readily recognized or addressed at the school level for a host of reasons.

In general, the combination of allocating \$23 per student and delegating decisions to the school council has increased the availability, quality, and relevance of professional development for teachers in Kentucky. As we reported earlier<sup>4</sup>, however, much of professional development continues to be about general techniques and procedures taught in workshops outside the school. Based on the current state of knowledge about effective professional development, we argued that if teachers are expected to continue to improve their practice, they need opportunities to learn more about the subject matter they teach and new ways to teach it. This includes learning more about how students learn and the problems they encounter in different subjects. Such learning requires intensive courses—counted in weeks not hours or days—and ongoing opportunities to learn from and with colleagues during the workday. Teachers also need regular contact with colleagues outside their schools.

We observed a few schools where teachers were encouraged to learn more about the

subjects they teach, to observe other teachers in the school and in other schools, and to work closely with their colleagues to improve instruction. These schools had managed to develop a climate in which adult learning was built into the work day and considered an important part of the job. But these schools were exceptions. They tended to have extraordinary leaders and, as a result, an unusual level of camaraderie, trust, and willingness to learn among faculty members.

Some of these schools pointed to the leadership and support of their superintendents and professional development coordinators as key to their pursuit of learning. We saw the benefits of these district functions, and they seemed to us a potentially important source of direction and assistance. But most were silent about a district role. In our district interviews we found a general reluctance to become involved in professional development, viewing it as one of several areas in which schools act independently under site-based decision making.

Districts receive little guidance on how they might provide leadership in professional development, beyond assisting with Consolidated Plan development. Hence, for this phase of our research, we wanted to look more closely at the role districts play and identify examples where districts are exercising leadership in professional development without compromising school discretion.

## STUDY DESIGN

We selected six districts based on reputation, our prior first-hand knowledge, and their overlap with the regions chosen for another strand of our research that aims to 'map' the professional development opportunities available to schools in three regions (one western, one central, and one eastern). In each we interviewed central office staff as well as

principals and teachers in at least two schools in each district. At both the central office and schools, we asked about priorities for professional development, strategies for instructional improvement, choices about professional development (which providers are chosen, how much happens at the school site), and how judgments about quality or effectiveness are made.

It is important to note that we began this effort before the requirements of HB53 had any effect on schools. This legislation encourages more attention to curriculum content and collaborative work among teachers. In fact, in the summer of 1999, subject-matter academies in middle school science and social studies and elementary literacy were held across the state for the first time. We collected most of the data described here during the 1998-99 school year, prior to these institutes.

## FINDINGS

Across the six districts, we identified a variety of professional development activities with rich curriculum content and examples of ongoing school-based learning opportunities for teachers. Districts had significant influence in these professional development choices but played quite different roles in this arena. We provide three examples here and then turn to the inferences we have drawn across the districts. The first two examples illustrate strong district leadership emanating from the superintendent and other key central office staff. The third example illustrates a more common pattern of one central office person committed to improving the quality of professional development.

**District 1.** A small district in south central Kentucky, this district has roughly 65% of its students on free and reduced lunch. The district has a history of strong leadership and involvement in professional development. District leaders are clear about their focus on

strengthening instruction and the importance of developing and supporting principals as instructional leaders and providing opportunities for principals and teachers to learn about instruction. They do this by providing professional development in areas they think are important, and they pay stipends for teachers to attend. For example, they have brought in nationally recognized presenters in writing and mathematics to offer classes. After such presentations, individual schools follow up on the presentations although the schools can decide whether or not to use the original presenters.

Central office staff see a big part of their job as bringing ideas and consultants to the attention of the schools. The Superintendent and the Instructional Supervisor (who is the Professional Development Coordinator) also communicate to principals and teachers their belief that the schools need to move beyond one-shot workshops. District initiatives continue during the school year; for example, math classes are offered once a week throughout the year. As one high school teacher described this effort:

*Math is one area where scores weren't as high as others. So our district decided they would get together all the math teachers from 4th grade through high school level and allow us to work together to align not only in the school but through the district. We have gotten ideas about what students can do at different grade levels and maybe learn from different levels. [We] have pulled in people from KDE, other universities, [who] give presentations, assist with ideas during the meetings. . . [and] will assist in our class if we want.*

The district participates in several external initiatives, which they believe have brought them excellent development opportunities and which serve to unify the district because multiple schools participate. For example, they are part of the Appalachian Rural

Systemic Initiative (ARSI) in which a teacher partner gets a substitute for the year and spends the year taking courses, visiting other schools, and working with teachers in the middle and high school in math, science, and technology. They credit both the National Alliance for Restructuring Education (NARE) and the Kentucky Leadership Academy (KLA) with strengthening leadership at both the district and school level.

The superintendent doesn't, however, paint a totally rosy picture. "Decentralization in theory is good—it just presents different challenges." So he views his role as district leader to provide lots of opportunities and suggestions, and, in so doing, finds some schools more open than others to this approach. In describing how the central office has changed, the Instructional Supervisor corroborates this view:

*With site-based, schools are in charge of their own destiny. In the central office we have been in process of changing from people who, by position, had authority to support kinds of people. Our influence now comes more through what we have to offer. So, what we have centered on is improving instruction and helping principals define or discover their vision on what they want their school to become and provide for every student. So, we use a lot of our time to look into what good instruction is, what the national standards are talking about, and looking for research-based kinds of programs, strategies, and initiatives. And then providing access to schools to all these kinds of things—what the research says good instruction is and helping the school get it.*

The district has shown consistent gains overall on the state assessment, yet that is not the only measure that school and central office staff use to judge effectiveness of professional development. Teachers evaluate their professional development experiences in terms of usefulness in the classroom: Is it workable? Are the students interested? Does it make

sense? Teachers cited changes in their classroom ranging from how they ask questions to how they organize materials to make them more accessible to students. From the district perspective, as expressed by the Instructional Supervisor:

*You have to have some kind of measure that is tied to what you care about . . . even though you may not be able to scientifically prove it is directly linked. But if a district is working heavily in math, student performance should increase. If you are talking about changing teachers' philosophy about what they teach and how they teach it, it takes time. We decided we wouldn't look at math scores this year . . . so had time to put some things in place.*

But district staff also point to other indicators of progress that they deem important, including the way teachers do their planning, the format of lesson plans, and how units are developed. They also say that progress can be tracked by looking at the kind of work students are doing and the quality of the products they turn out.

**District 2.** Half of this district's students are on free and reduced lunch. Despite the poverty in the area, 12 of the 14 schools in the district achieved "rewards" status in the 1996-1998 accountability cycle. Moreover, in keeping with the trend around the state, the two schools that were in "decline" were both middle schools. Throughout the 1990s, the district kept the same leadership team in place and presented a consistent—and evolving—vision over the years. With a history of working with the Effective Schools Program, the district had long been involved in assessing needs using student assessment data as the centerpiece, organizing school faculties into committees, and developing school leadership development. Coupled with a focus on safety, school climate, and high expectations for all students, this district was ready for KERA when it debuted.

In 1990, the district created district-wide committees in order to sustain the improvements they hoped to make. The District Leadership Committee (DLC) consisted of principals and teachers from each school. This group was charged with making decisions about district-wide professional development and school improvement issues. Next, the district leadership recruited a group of teachers from each building to provide training on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The goal was to develop a group of teachers within each building who could train their colleagues.

These teachers, in turn, trained their colleagues back in their schools on assessment. The trainers were convened again and brought with them examples of students' class work to evaluate. The following summer, the same groups of trainers spent another week receiving more training on writing, curriculum alignment, and instruction. Over the two-year period, trainers received between 15 and 20 days of training. This continued over a four-year period. At the same time, the teacher groups were part of the Effective Schools process at their schools. Teachers didn't see any conflicts—the training they received was consistent with the school improvement work back in their schools. Continuity and consistency are key in this district.

At the school level, the consistent perception is that the district is not dictating priorities but rather working with principals and teachers to use test data to determine their own priorities and then provide help in finding resources to address the priorities. As one elementary principal said:

*The district doesn't set priorities—we do. Like for social studies—we are bringing in “Economics for America” ... and we brought in Professor Nystrand from Louisville who provided professional development around the Nystrand map set. [The district professional development coordinator] set this up for us.*

A high school principal echoed this observation:

*We have a real good working relationship with [the district office], the School Board, and especially with [the district professional development coordinator]. She can answer our questions.... We have the autonomy to do what we need to do. Accountability is the other side of this.*

A middle school principal talked almost exclusively about the process he and his faculty had put in place for analyzing test scores and identifying professional development to address student learning needs. For him, the district office, and especially the district professional development coordinator, was a vital resource—the first place he turned after he and his faculty had identified their needs. Clearly, at the school level, educators see themselves as being in charge of their own professional development and view the district office as a source of assistance and support.

The goal of the district has been to make professional development part of the school improvement process, beginning with an analysis of test scores. An assistant superintendent works with the principals and teacher teams on analyzing and using assessment data in their planning. The district relies on outside consultants; when it has a need, it goes out and looks for the *expert*. All of the principals with whom we spoke focused their comments *not* on consultants but on the school improvement process that each had in place.

Although activities at the individual schools are driven by the planning processes at each, all the schools in the district are involved in these three common initiatives, orchestrated from the district office:

**Units of study.** *Each building was working on these in 1998-99. Teachers identified major topics in each subject matter. As teachers identified what they needed to do,*



*they found certain things had to be taught at certain levels. They also discovered the importance of curricular differentiation in order to meet the needs of different students. At the high school level, teachers were also developing integrated units to address the connections across the subjects and also to address the core content.*

**Standards project.** *This initiative involves teachers in identifying standards from the Core Content, national standards, and the assessments. Teachers are currently identifying standards for each grade level in each subject matter. For each standard, teachers are developing sample assessments. This process is about 2 years away from completion. A national consultant is providing assistance to schools for this activity. This is considered to be the primary content-focused professional development that the district is currently supporting.*

**Technology.** *The district recruited groups of teachers from each building to work with Apple on technology. This initiative is now in its 3rd year. A major push in 1997-99 was training teachers to use technology as a classroom tool. The district committed \$125K over two years to train teachers in technology.*

After the 1998-99 school year, both the superintendent and one of the key assistant superintendents left the district. Whether the organizational mechanisms and “training-of-trainers” model they instituted and the culture of trust they helped develop will survive their departure remains to be seen. According to the professional development coordinator, the “most important [factor in the district’s success] has been the district’s commitment to high expectations. And this originated with the superintendent and assistant superintendent.”

**District 3.** This district is also small with a high poverty level. Unlike the two districts

described above, the instructional leadership in this district comes from the instructional supervisor. The superintendent supports her work but tries “to stay out of her way.” The board merely tolerates the work. They will not invest local funds, they do not like time away from instruction, and they will not approve any out-of-state travel and frown on attending conferences in the state. The superintendent describes the situation as follows:

*Neither the board nor the public are supportive. It [professional development] is perceived as an unnecessary cost, a cost factor that could be reduced. They particularly resent travel costs and question every voucher. The president has made an open statement that we should not be sending people out of state. If we can’t get what we need here, it is not worth having. This sends the principals and teachers a strong signal about PD. This mind set is strong and so we rarely send people out of state. I don’t want to fight with the board over travel vouchers.*

The district supervisor acts as stimulator and broker for professional development. She has a strong vision of what professional development is needed and what it should look like, and she is trying to change the culture in accordance with that vision. She identifies needs and finds good opportunities to meet them, then cajoles and persuades school staff to participate. When it works, she tries to use the successes to get others involved. But it is diplomacy, interpersonal skill, and fund-raising ability more than needs, authority, or accountability that are driving the work. She says:

*There is a fine line to walk here. Not everyone is as excited about professional development as I am. They are even less excited about having someone else tell them how to do it. The district stance has been to provide leadership and support while accepting the reality that control lies with the councils. In my opinion, we need to help principals and school*



*councils understand how PD can help them, how it works, and how to recognize quality. Too many of them do not understand, so they make bad decisions.*

The district has tried to integrate professional development with some districtwide curriculum work. They did some major work in math and science last summer (1998) to align the curriculum with the core content standards and improve articulation. They had teachers come from across the district, and had outside expert facilitators. The instructional supervisor feels that the district must play a leadership role in curriculum:

*I have concerns about the curriculum; our goal should not be to make each teacher into a curriculum developer. We are arguing with KDE about this. They do not agree with me. They think all can do it, and should do it. The ASCD piece on standards-based instruction says that school-based curriculum development leads to chaos.*

The Board has not provided much support for her work and often makes things worse. They decided to let schools have flexibility over how the PD time is used; so schools can cancel the scheduled days and use half-days or evenings. This leads to extra days off for teachers and makes principals popular. The district staff are frustrated by this. They say that they want the schools to make the decisions but they want responsible decisions. But at present there is no structure for PD, no guiding policy; everything is ad hoc.

The impact of the leadership from the district office, and its limits, are nicely summed up in the statement by one of the more engaged principals:

*[The central office is] helpful. They find opportunities for us. [The supervisor] finds money, and she has set up study groups and does all she can to help us. Five of our teachers*

*are in the math study group. The district provides materials. Five more are in the reading group, but they haven't all gone to all of the meetings. The study group meets after school and it is hard to get teachers to buy in. And it is even harder to get them to use what they are learning.*

The district does not do any systematic evaluation of the effects of professional development, in part because the Instructional Supervisor worries that any formal data collection would be perceived as a threat to the schools. Her criterion is that change in teaching practice occurs, and she uses the principals' reports on teachers as her source, acknowledging that this may not be very reliable. She would like to look at student work as a way of judging the effectiveness of professional development.

## DISCUSSION

KERA has significantly increased the amount of professional development, its connection to school improvement, and the way in which decisions are made. Under site-based decision making, schools control two-thirds of the budget for professional development as well as choices about curriculum and instruction. This leaves districts unsure of the role they are to play. In the past, professional development was a combination of activities mandated by the district and individual teachers' choices. Now that schools are asked to play a major decision making role, the result has been considerable improvement in the quality and relevance of professional development—up to a point. To move into the more difficult areas of how to change teaching practices in each curriculum area requires both the recognition of this need, the motivation to do something about it, and access to quality opportunities.

Districts can play an important leadership role in shifting professional development from a

focus on procedures and workshops to more challenging experiences grounded in curriculum and instruction. Yet most districts have chosen a low-profile role in professional development. The three cases described above demonstrate ways in which districts can provide direction and support that neither make demands of schools that intrude on their turf nor abdicate their leadership role.

As the cases illustrate, district leaders influence school professional development choices in a variety of ways. District 1 exercises leadership through a focus on strengthening instruction, providing incentives for choosing top-notch professional development, and developing school leadership. Their strategy is to offer high quality curriculum-based professional development, encourage teachers to participate through stipends, bring good ideas and people to the attention of schools, and encourage principals to participate in leadership development grounded in curriculum content.

District 2 also exercises leadership by focusing on instructional quality but their strategy is different. Here district leaders focus on helping schools make professional development an integral part of their school improvement process. They provide intensive learning opportunities to principals and teacher teams in each school over a period of many years in order to create a leadership core that then works with the rest of the faculty. Then, they trust the schools to make good decisions about using resources and provide support and technical assistance to help schools carry out their plans.

The leadership in District 3 is the Instructional Supervisor who leads by communicating a strong vision of what professional development is needed; this vision grounds professional development in curriculum. The approach is similar to that of the other two districts—to bring high quality opportunities to the attention of schools and help teachers take advantage of

them. The impact is somewhat less because the Instructional Supervisor operates independently from the rest of the district leadership whereas in the other districts the leadership views professional development as a primary instrument of school improvement.

These district leaders do not lead in the same way, yet they have a number of elements in common. Importantly, these leaders value teachers, appreciate the importance of curriculum content knowledge, and understand the need for non-traditional and school-based approaches to professional development. For some, in fact, their appreciation for content knowledge resulted from experiences with external providers such as ARSI.

One shared element is *focus*. Each of these district leaders begins with a strong focus on instruction, tied to curriculum, and a vision of strong professional development in each curriculum area that goes well beyond workshops. The focus may be on one or two curriculum areas or it may be through coordinating and integrating several curricular strands. This focus serves two purposes. It communicates important ideas about the nature of effective learning situations—both for students and for adults. And it steers a course through a crowded terrain. By focusing attention on goals for particular curriculum areas and strategies, these leaders help schools avoid the problems of tackling too many issues each year or changing focus from one year to the next.

In addition to focus, each district has a *strategy* for engaging school faculties in good professional development. One strategy that the districts share is bringing good ideas, people, and learning opportunities to the attention of school staff. They draw on a host of resources and networks but they are selective in what they choose, based on their own knowledge and the advice of trusted others. The districts also aim to create the capacity to lead and

provide professional development among school staff. One district does this by equipping a team in each school to lead others. In another, district leaders invest in helping principals become strong leaders knowledgeable about curriculum and instructional strategies. These leaders also practice what they preach and, as such, explicitly provide models to principals and teachers about new ways of leading and the importance of continuing education. In each case, the leaders are clear about what they are trying to accomplish and have created strategies linked to their goals.

A third element is *persuasion*. These leaders understand the importance of incentives which include paying for the professional development and offering stipends to participants. But these leaders also accomplish their goals through their ability to persuade principals and site councils and teachers to work with the district and with each other toward a shared set of goals. In each, there is a key person—the Professional Development Coordinator or Instructional Supervisor—who plays a pivotal role in helping schools find resources, steers schools in certain directions, and provides direct assistance, such as helping with test score analysis and interpretation.

A fourth element is *persistence* over time. In these districts, leaders know that the kinds of changes they desire take a long time, hence they maintain their focus over a period of many years. They also invest in leadership development in schools, whether it is principals or teams at schools because they understand that district leadership is fragile and grants never last long enough to reach everyone. Although our cases include an example in which one central office person carries the entire leadership role, it is clearly more effective and more likely to be sustained when there is a unified focus supported by the superintendent, the board, and central office staff. It is difficult to persist in the face of resistance at the district or school level; and, if the leadership rests with one person, when that person leaves, the focus disappears.

A fifth element is a priority on *curriculum content*. The Instructional Supervisors in these districts direct schools' attention to particular subject matter content. In two districts, partly as a result of ARSI, the focus has been on math and science with attention to learning new concepts about math and science, how students learn these concepts, and different strategies for teaching them. In the third, the focus has been on linking standards, curriculum units, and assessment within each subject area.

The final shared element is *attention to quality*. All three districts carefully select external providers based on reputation and first-hand experience. District leaders also pay attention to the effects of their investments. They do this through a variety of means including informal feedback from principals. Although most are hesitant to look at test score changes over the short run, they believe that major investments in a subject area should be reflected in changes in how teachers plan and teach, the kinds of work students do, and ultimately in measures of student achievement.

There is no magic in these districts. They have leaders who have taken their jobs seriously and see an important role for the central office. They play these roles differently but they share: focused attention to instructional quality, coherent strategies to achieve their goals, and the ability to persuade schools and colleagues to sign on to the agenda. And they persist in their efforts year after year. In the absence of opportunities for district leaders to learn more about the importance of professional development and their potential to provide direction and support, the leaders we describe will likely remain the exception.

<sup>1</sup> McDiarmid, G., David, J., Corcoran, T., Kannapel, P., and Coe, P. (1997). *Professional development under KERA: Meeting the challenge*. Lexington, KY: Partnership for Kentucky Schools

